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NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY—No. IX.

VALENTINE GREATRACKS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE DUBLIN PENNY JOURNAL.

SIR—Mr. Valentine Greatracks, who is represented in the above woodcut, as engaged in the act of curing a poor blind boy by the simple process of stroking the part afflicted, is, in my opinion, worthy of being placed in one of the niches of your gallery of Irish characters. The extraordinary cures he performed—the irreproachable character which he bore—the number of distinguished individuals that gave testimony to his healing powers—and the apparently inadequate means which he employed to effect his purposes—all induce me to consider him as an uncommon person; and, without at all desiring to ascribe miraculous gifts to the individual, we must be brought to the conclusion that changes can be produced in the human frame through causes which are not dreamt of in our philosophy. There lies before me a tract published in the year 1666, entitled “A brief Account of Mr. Valentine Greatracks, and Divers of the Strange Cures by him Performed, written by himself, in a Letter addressed to the Hon. Robert Boyle; whereunto are annexed the Testimonials of several eminent and worthy Persons of the Chief Matters of Facts therein Related.”

This autobiography, which occupies 42 small quarto pages, I shall attempt to contract, so as to give the readers of the PENNY JOURNAL a short account of the man and his performances.

“I was born the 14th of February, 1628, and was son of William Greatracks, of Affane, in the county of Waterford, who died while I was an infant. My mother was daughter of Sir Edward Harris, Knight, one of his Majesty's Justices of the King's Bench. She was a virtuous and discreet woman, an excellent neighbour, and a most indulgent and, at the same time, provident parent, who took care of my education, and sent me to the free-school of Lismore, erected by the charity of the late Earl of Cork. There I made some proficiency in learning, and was designed for the college, but was prevented by the breaking out of the rebellion in Ireland, from whence I was forced to fly, and took refuge with my uncle, Mr. E. Harris, who looked after my studies, and perfected me in humanity and divinity. On arriving at man's estate, finding that my mother's means were too small to maintain me along with her other children, I determined to return to Ireland, and there either regain my estate, or lose my life. My poor country was at that time in a deplorable state; for I saw differences that to me seemed unnatural, and I resolved not to intermeddle therein till the mist of confusion was over. I retired to the Castle of Cappoquin, where I spent a year's time in contemplation, and saw so much of the madness of the world that my life became a burthen to me, and my soul was as weary of this habitation of clay as ever a galley slave was weary of his oar.” Mr. Greatracks goes on to describe, in a very feeling way (in which he exhibits the sentiments of a true patriot and a Christian), the state of Ireland

until the restoration of Charles the Second, on which occasion he was made Clerk of the Peace for the county of Cork, and a magistrate, which functions he discharged with integrity and a good name. He thus describes his first feeling of being possessed of healing powers.

"About four years since, I had an impulse which frequently suggested to me that there was bestowed on me the gift of curing the king's evil, which, for the extraordinariness thereof, I thought fit to conceal for some time; but, at length, I told my wife; for, whether sleeping or waking, I had this impulse; but her reply was, that it was an idle imagination. But, to prove the contrary, one William Maher, of the parish of Lismore, brought his son to my wife, who used to distribute medicines in charity to the neighbours; and my wife came and told me, that I had now an opportunity of trying my impulse, for there was one at hand that had the evil grievously in the eyes, throat, and cheeks; whereupon I laid my hands on the places afflicted, and prayed to God, for Jesus' sake, to heal him. In a few days afterwards, the father brought his son so changed that the eye was almost quite whole; and, to be brief, (to God's glory I speak it) within a month he was perfectly healed, and so continues."

He subsequently cured another patient, to the utter astonishment of the physician of the neighbourhood, who said, if he cured that person, he would not question but he might cure all manner of diseases. Accordingly he received an impulse discovering to him that he had the gift of healing in a more extended way, and shortly afterwards "there came unto me a poor man, with a violent pain in his loins, so that he went almost double, and having also a grievous ulcer in his leg, very black, who desired me, for God's sake, to lay my hands on him; whereupon I put my hands on his loins and flank, and immediately went the pains out of him, so that he was relieved, and could stand upright without trouble; the ulcer also in his leg was healed; so that, in a few days, he returned to his labour as a mason."

It appears that Mr. Greatracks, though in general successful, was not so in all instances, and he attempts to explain the circumstances as follows: "Many demand of me why some are cured and not all? To which question I answer, that God may please to make use of such means, by me, as shall operate according to the dispositions of the patient, and, therefore, cannot be expected to be alike effectual in all. They also demand further of me, why some are cured *at once*, and not all? and why the pains should fly immediately out of some, and take such *ambages* in others? and why it should go out of some at their eyes, some at their fingers, some at their ears or mouths? To which I say, if all these things could have a *plain* account given of them, there would be no cause to count them strange. Let them tell me what substance that is which removes and goes out with so great expedition, and it will be more easy to resolve their questions. Some will know of me, why or how I do pursue some pains from place to place till I have chased them out of the body, by laying my hands on the outside of the clothes only (as is usual), and not *all* pains? To which I answer that—and others have been abundantly satisfied that it is so—though I am not able to give a reason, yet I am apt to believe there are some pains which afflict men after the manner of evil spirits, which kind of pains cannot endure my hand, nay, not my gloves, but fly immediately, though six or eight coats or cloaks be put between the persons and my hand, as at the Lady Ranelagh's, at York House, in London, as well as in Ireland, has been manifested. Now another question will arise, whether the operation of my hand proceeds from the temperature of my body, or from a Divine gift, or from both? To which I say, that I have reason to believe that there is some extraordinary gift of God."

Such being his power and his pretensions, an immense number of people, not only from the adjoining parts of Ireland, but from England, resorted to him; so much so, that he lamented that he could neither follow his own business or enjoy the company of his family and friends. His stables, barns, and other out-houses, were filled with the sick of all sorts of diseases; and he remarks, that it was no small instance of an interposing Providence, that none of his own family were infected by

them, nor did they infect each other. In the meantime, the clergy of the diocese of Waterford took up the matter seriously—we cannot say wisely—and the Dean of Lismore cited him to the Bishop's Court; Where appearing, upon being asked where was his licence for curing, as all physicians ought to have from the Ordinary of the Diocese, he replied, "That though he had no such licence, he knew no law which prohibited any person from doing what good he could to his neighbour." He was, nevertheless, prohibited from laying hands on any for the future. Which wise order puts us in mind of the similar enactment of the French king against the working of the Jansenist miracles at the tomb of the Abbe Paris, that caused the following epigram to be written:—

"De par Le Roi defense a Dieu
De faire miracles en ce Lieu."

And which may thus be done into English:—

"Our King commands his God to cease
From working wonders in this place."

The Ordinary of Lismore had worse success than the King of France, and Greatracks proceeded in his healing, until his fame reached the higher orders in England, and he was entreated to come over to cure the Viscountess Conway of an obstinate headache; this Greatracks consented to do, merely stipulating that a sum sufficient to bear his expenses should be provided him. On landing in England, it was surprising what crowds followed his footsteps, who in great numbers were healed. Greatracks fairly acknowledges that he did not succeed in relieving the noble patient for whose sake he came: but honoured and munificently treated by Lord Conway, he cured many in the neighbourhood of Ragley, of divers diseases, and from thence was summoned up to London, by his majesty, King Charles II., who was pleased to recommend him to the notice not only of his courtiers but his physicians. "In London," says Mr. Greatracks, "I was persuaded to stay, doing daily what the good Lord enabled me, until I met with your lordship (the Hon. Robert Boyle,) who were pleased to be an eye-witness of what I did, and to bring several other learned and worthy persons with you, to bear testimony to the truth of what appeared, and to encourage me to give the account to the world." Mr. Greatracks concludes his narrative as follows:—"Now, whether I have done my duty as a Christian, in employing that talent which God had entrusted me withal, to the good of people distressed and afflicted, or no, judge you and every good man. Thus far I appeal to the world, whether I have taken rewards, deluded or deceived any man. All further I will say is, that I pray I may never be weary of well doing, and that I may be found a faithful servant when I come to give up my last account."

Mr. Greatracks remained in London some time, and resided in Lincoln's-Inns' Fields, where he became the wonder of many, and the subject of ridicule to others. Dr. Lloyd, the chaplain of the Charter House, wrote a book against him, entitled, "Wonders no Miracles;" and it was in answer to this treatise, which was certainly uncharitably severe, that Greatracks wrote his "Brief Account." The wits of Charles's court, made themselves also very merry at his expense. The lively and accomplished Frenchman, St. Evremont, who at that time resided in England, wrote a novel called "The Irish Prophet;" in which he made the people's credulity with respect to Greatracks, the subject of his sarcasm. But fortified by the testimonials of both physicians and divines, he rose superior to his detractors; and a Mr. Love, who had on a former occasion unjustly ridiculed him, stepped forth to assure the world that he was witness to his curing the falling sickness, in a way beyond ordinary credibility; and he says, in a letter to Lord Orrery, "that the Royal Society, and other MODERN PHILOSOPHERS, unable to dispute the fact, found words to define it, and called the strange effects, 'A sanative contagion in the body, which had an antipathy to some particular diseases, and not to others.'" Indeed, this most learned society has not disdained to hand down to posterity the memorials of this man, for a Mr. Thoresby has, in their Transactions, given some remarkable instances of cures performed by him, and

in particular on his own brother, "who was seized with a violent pain in the head and back; Mr. Greatracks (coming by accident to the house) gave present ease to his head, by only stroaking it with his hands. He then fell to rub his back, which he most complained of; but the pain immediately fled from his hand to his right thigh; then he pursued it with his hand to his knee, from thence to his leg, ankle and foot, and at last to his great toe. As it fell lower it grew more violent, and when in his toe it made him roar out, but upon rubbing it there, it vanished." He also gives another instance of his uncle's daughter, "who was seized when a girl, with a great pain and weakness in her knees, which occasioned a white swelling; this followed her for several years, and having used divers means to no effect, after six or seven years time, Mr. Greatracks coming to Dublin, she was brought to him. He stroaked both her knees, and gave her present ease, the pain flying downwards from his hand, till he drove it out of her toes, and the swelling in a short time wore away and never troubled her after."

I do not find any record of how long Mr. Greatracks remained in England; he was in Dublin in the year 1681, but how long he lived afterwards is uncertain; his family, I believe, is not now resident in the County Waterford. A writer in Blackwood's Magazine, if I recollect aright, says, "that to a Mr. Greatracks, a descendant of his, some have attributed the *honour* of being the author of Junius's Letters."

R. Y.

P.S. A number of certificates of cures follow the treatise of Mr. Greatracks, signed by the most respectable, pious, and learned men in England; amongst which, besides the above-named Robert Boyle, are Bishop Rust; Cudworth, author of the "Intellectual System;" Dr. Whichcot; Dr. Wilkins; Dr. Simon Patrick; the Countess of Devonshire, &c. &c. As one of the best testimonials of the probity and powers of this extraordinary man, it may be well to give, from the Rawdon Papers, the following extract of a letter from Lord Conway to Sir George Rawdon:—

"Dear Brother,

"I have received yours of the 29th January, but the former letter therein mentioned to have been written to me on your coming to Dublin, is not yet come to my hands. Mr. Greatracks hath been here a fortnight to-morrow, and my wife is not the better for him; very few others have failed under his hands, of many hundreds that he hath touched in these parts. I must confess—that before his arrival, I did not believe the tenth-part of those things which I have been an eye-witness of, and several others of as accurate judgment as any in this kingdom, who are come hither out of curiosity, do acknowledge the truth of his operations. This morning the Bishop of Gloucester recommended to me a prebend's son in his diocese, to be brought to him for a leprosy from head to foot, which hath been judged incurable above ten years, and in my chamber he cured him perfectly; that is, from a moist humor, 'twas immediately dried up, and began to fall off; the itching was quite gone, and the heat of it taken away. The youth was transported to admiration. The dean saw this as well as myself, but it is not the hundredth part, and I am confident at the least of forty that we have seen, among which are many pleasant passages done purposely to satisfy our curiosity and experience. So that I wonder he had not a greater esteem in Ireland; but after all this I am far from thinking them miracles, or that his cures are at all miraculous: but I believe it is by a *sanative virtue* and a *natural efficiency*, which extends not to all diseases, but is much more proper and effectual to some than to others, as he doth also dispatch some with a great deal of ease, and others not without a great deal of pains. This inclosed is a letter of his to his wife, which I desire may be sent carefully to her; and as to his concerns in Ireland, I fear he doth not mind them so well as he ought to do; probably Sir Thomas Stanley may inform you how they stand, and if you can do him any service, I shall take it extremely kindly, for he takes a great deal of pains about my wife, and is very affectionate to do all that lies in his power. I had a letter also from my brother Francis. I am confident Mr. Greatracks would recover him, or the

Bishop of Down, for I do pretty well know what distempers he can cure, and he cannot.

"So I rest your's, &c.

"CONWAY."

Ragley,

9, February, 1665.

DIE NEUJAHRSNACHT EINES UNGLUECK- LICHEN.

THE NEW-YEAR'S-NIGHT OF AN UNFORTUNATE MAN.

(From the Prose of Jean Paul Richter.)

In the lone stillness of the New-year's-night,

An old man at his window stood, and turned

His dull eyes to the firmament, where, bright

And pure, a million rolling planets burned;

Then cast them on the earth, so cold and white;

And felt, that moment, that of all who mourned

And groaned upon its bosom, none there were

With his deep wretchedness and great despair.

For near him lay his grave!—hidden from view,

Not by the flowers of Youth, but by the snows

Of age alone. In torturing thought he flew

Over the past, and on his memory rose

That picture of his life which conscience drew,

With all its fruits—diseases, sins, and woes—

A worn-out frame—a blighted soul—dark years

Of agony, remorse, and withering fears!

Like spectral things, his bright young days came back,

And that cross-road of life where, when a boy,

His father placed him first: its right-hand track

Leads to a land of glory, peace and joy;

Its left to wildernesses waste and black,

Where snakes and plagues and poisonous blasts destroy.

Which had been his? Alas! the serpents hung

Coiled round his heart—their venom on his tongue!

Sunk in unutterable grief, he cried—

"Come back, my vanished youth! Oh, God! restore

My morn of life! Oh, Father! be my guide,

And let me only choose my path once more!"

But on the wide waste air his ravings died

Away, and all was silent as before.

His youth had glided by, swift as the wave;

His father came not—he was in his grave.

Wild lights flashed flickering by: a star was falling;

Down to the miry marsh he saw it rush.

"Like me!" he said, and oh! the thought was galling;

And hot and heart-wrung tears began to gush:

Sleepwalkers crossed his eyes in shapes appalling;

Huge windmills lifted up their arms to crush—

And skeleton faces rose up from the dim

Depths of the charnel-house, and glared on him!

Amid these overboiling bursts of feeling,

Rich music, heralding the young year's birth,

Rolled from a distant steeple, like the pealing

Of some celestial organ o'er the earth.

Softer emotions o'er him now came stealing;

He felt the soul's unpurchasable worth.

"Return!" he cried again, imploringly,

"Oh! my lost youth—return, return to me!"

AND YOUTH RETURNED, and age withdrew its terrors;

Still was he young, for he had dreamed the whole,

But faithful is the image conscience mirrors,

When whirlwind passions darken not the soul.

Alas! too real were his sins and errors,

Too truly had he made this earth his goal:

He wept, and thanked his God that, with the will,

He had the power to choose the right path still.

* * * * *

Here, youthful reader, ponder!—and if thou,

Like him, art reeling over the abyss,

And shakest off sin's iron trammels now,

This ghastly dream may be thy guide to bliss.

But should age once be written on thy brow,

Its wrinkles will not be a dream like this:

Vainly thy tears may flow above the urn

Of thy departed youth—it never will return!

CLARENCE.